

Chapter 1

Letting Go: Teacher-Directed Writing Versus Writer's Workshop

Today, Hannah has invited me into her classroom to observe her writing time. She bravely admits that this is her least favorite time of day. In fact she considers writing such a challenge, she often "lets it go," allowing something that feels more pressing to take its place. I love her honesty.

She reads aloud *Beast Feast* by Douglas Florian (1994) and pauses to point out lively, playful words. Then she stands and writes a prompt on the board: "Describe your pet." Anticipating the response of students without a pet, she quickly adds, "or a pet you wish you had." She asks the students to use words that create a picture.

As Hannah hands out lined paper, students at the first table engage her with questions and needs.

"Mrs. Mackie, Mason took my pencil."

"What if I had a cat, but it died?"

"Do we have to write the date on the paper?"

"I don't want *any* kind of pet," says a clearly decisive girl.

Hannah responds with the patience known only to primary school teachers and growers of extremely rare orchids. She resolves the pencil conflict, sensitively encourages the student to write about her

deceased cat, reminds everyone in class to put the dates on their papers, and brainstorms an alternate prompt for the student who does not want any pet—though none of Hannah's other suggestions seem to satisfy the girl either.

Responses to questions and troubleshooting continue as Hannah moves around the room. Before she can reach the last table of students—kids who are having a lively conversation about who has the biggest muscle—she has stretched out the sounds of three words, reminded a student of the shape of the letter *h*, and dictated the spelling of *gerbil*.

There! Finally each and every student has a sheet of paper and all, for a few brief moments, are engaged with the task at hand. Hannah has two lovely conversations about the use of strong verbs, reminds one student to use his finger to mark spaces, and then the most dreaded words are uttered by a boy who received his paper first:

"I'm done!"

"Aidan," says Hannah rushing over to the boy, "Let me see!" She reads aloud: *I have a dog named Barney. He chews tennis balls.*

Hannah smiles. "My dog likes to chew balls, too. What does Barney look like?"

"He's black," says Aidan.

"And big!" says a helpful student working nearby.

"Write that!" says Hannah handing the paper back to Aidan.

It's her best strategy for extending writing time. But it's not highly successful. Hannah teaches first grade, and six-year-olds love to be *the best, the brightest*, but most of all—*the fastest*. As soon as one child says, "I'm done!" others follow in quick succession. The noise level rises and students cluster around Hannah to show her their products, but they gently wander off as she questions them—a kind of "No, thank you" to her attempts to get them to add more.

She looks up with me with a face that is clear to read. It says, *See why I avoid this?*

* * *

I often refer to this writing model as "Spinning the Plates." The teacher runs around trying to meet the individual needs of all students—getting the plates spinning, if you will—and then at the first "I'm done!" all the plates come crashing down.

So what's the alternative? A workshop model. I hesitate to use the terminology "writer's workshop" because it is one of those labels that

has evolved to connote a wide range of often contradictory practices. In fact, Hannah may believe she is conducting a writer's workshop. But let's look at the difference between Hannah's writing time and Stacey's.

Stacey, who had lots of experience working with a writer's workshop model before moving to this district, quickly incorporates new ideas. She's used to having other practitioners in the classroom and eagerly welcomes another set of eyes (in the way we writers are always asking willing readers to provide feedback on our work). She begins her workshop with a mini-lesson on voice. She tells students she is going to write a story not once, but twice! She takes her marker and, on chart paper, writes a few sentences about her recent apple-picking excursion. Then she flips the chart paper and begins the story again, this time inserting words and details that reveal her unique feelings and perspective on the day. After reading both versions, she puts the marker down and asks, "Which of my stories has more voice?"

No doubt about it, the second story wins. Students are eager to point out places where Stacey's voice comes through in the second piece.

When the discussion ends, Stacey says, "Today, boys and girls, as you write, pay close attention to the quality details that show us who *you* are. Let your voice come through!" And then she asks, "Who knows what they're going to be working on?"

As students report briefly on their plans for this period, Stacey sends them off to the writing center. Each picks up his or her folder from the bin and selects a cup containing tools for writing and drawing. From there students settle around the room to reread yesterday's work, make additions or corrections, and write anew. Some students will begin new pieces, others will pick up where they left off the day before, and still others will use an editor's checklist to prepare their work for a writing conference. Many will choose to draw. For some, drawing is prewriting. For others, the drawing will be an integral part of their story.

A few students remain on the rug: two haven't formed a plan, one wishes to ask a question. Through brief questioning, Stacey guides the uncertain ones toward topics of their choice without resorting to "Why don't you tell me about _____" and confirms for the third student that yes, she is ready for a prepublication conference. The student nods and heads to the whiteboard to write her name under the heading "Editing Conference." She then gets her folder and begins working on

a new piece. As Stacey stands, she flips on the classical music that signals "Quiet Ten." For ten whole minutes, the class will be silent, allowing everyone to settle into a space that is conducive to thinking, imagining, writing.

Stacey picks up her folder, sits down at the table, and writes.

When ten minutes have passed, she turns off the music and the first student signed up for a conference approaches. As the student arranges her work, both Stacey and I glance around the room.

The parent volunteer who comes in to publish student work has arrived and has welcomed an enthusiastic boy, who has prepared for this occasion, to sit next to her at the computer.

A girl in the corner is reading a story about her birthday aloud to another. She recognizes an awkward sentence and, picking up a pencil, stops to make it clearer.

Today's class leader has gone to the writing center, picked up a date stamp, and is circulating the room, asking: "Where would you like me to stamp your work?" Students point to the place where their writing began today.

Two students are belly-down in the science center. Inspired by a recent school performance, they have decided to work together on a play.

Stacey reminds the student who has come to confer that today they will be focusing on voice. After the student reads her piece, Stacey uses a predictable format of response: she reflects what she heard, points to what's working well, and then questions the budding writer to guide her to new understandings. By following this regular structure, Stacey supports her students' writing growth without overwhelming them (or getting behind by spending too much time with one student). Sometimes she ends a conference by sharing a writing tip or teaching one new skill. The student leaves the table eager to make improvements, but before doing so, she erases her name from the conference list to allow another student to sign up.

For the next thirty minutes the students prewrite, write, confer, revise, and edit while Stacey meets with as many individuals as time allows. One boy with "tired fingers" joins Stacey and her current conference partner at the table. Stacey welcomes him with a nod, allowing him to listen as she and the student talk about what makes good writing.

The big hand hits twelve, Stacey tells everyone that writer's workshop has come to an end, and the kids moan—just like they do at the end of every writing period. Nevertheless, they dutifully clean up their

Te

Te

Te

B

V

S

A

Fig
Cn
De
Ve
Inc

Creates Dependence	Fosters Independence
Teacher selects writing prompt.	Students select writing topic.
Teacher is "keeper of supplies," handing out paper and pencils.	Materials are available in the writing center.
Teacher "stretches out" words or provides the spelling of words.	Students know that by "writing the sounds they hear" they are teaching themselves to read and write.
Because writing is assigned, students brainstorm whatever comes to mind in ten minutes and then exclaim, "I'm done!"	Students often plan what they will write in the future, and consequently organize their thoughts in the space between one writer's workshop and the next.
Writing lasts as long as a writing period or a journal page (or shorter!).	Students often work on the same writing piece for many days.
Students who are often minimally engaged in their work resist revision.	In anticipation of conferences, author's chair, or the possibility of coteaching a mini-lesson, students willingly revise.
All students publish their work at the same time.	Students publish on an individual basis when their work merits publication.

Figure 1.1
Creating
Dependence
Versus Fostering
Independence

writing supplies and move toward their cubbies to prepare for snack and recess. When they return to the classroom, they'll participate in a fifteen-minute "author's chair," where three students will share their work while others provide feedback.

In Stacey's class there is no such thing as being done.

So what's the difference between these two classes? Contrary to what one might think, there is no difference between the developmental stages, number of students who qualify for free lunch, reading levels, or distribution of students who are English language learners. These classrooms are across the hall from one another in the same school. Both teachers have high expectations for their students, but while Stacey has helped her students grow into independent thinkers and writers, Hannah, who is a truly admirable teacher in many ways, has inadvertently trained her students to depend on her. The table in Figure 1.1 lists just a few of the ways their practices compare.

By organizing the room well, presenting carefully crafted mini-lessons to teach students how to follow regular routines, and setting a tone that says, in essence, "We are all writers and all writing

teachers," Stacey has fostered an independence that truly supports writing growth. Giving up control of the little things allows her to create an authentic, energetic writing time that keeps everyone productively engaged.

So where does one begin?

Introduction and Chapter 1: Letting Go

Discussion Questions

- Which of the two writing sessions presented (Hannah's or Stacey's) most closely resembles writing time in your classroom? In what ways?
- What are the significant differences between a traditional writing program and writer's workshop?
- Do you believe that primary children are developmentally ready to participate in writer's workshop? Why or why not?
- Jennifer writes: "Nevertheless, I've come to believe that primary teachers, with the very best of intentions, inadvertently train their students to be dependent rather than independent writers." Do you agree?

Group Activity

Examine the chart on page 9. Do any of the practices on the left-hand side of the chart describe you or your students? If so, identify the beliefs behind these practices. For example, you might provide your students with prompts because you believe one or more of the following:

- My students struggle to come up with their own topics.
- My students lack the daily experiences necessary to come up with topics.
- I need to prepare my students for standardized tests, which provide students with prompts.

Once you've identified the beliefs behind the practice, imagine and record the counter-beliefs:

- My students are capable of coming up with their own topics.
- All students have experiences that are topic worthy.
- I can still prepare my students for testing without giving them prompts every day.

(As you try this exercise, you may discover that you don't have any firmly held beliefs behind the practices—they may be simply the way you were taught or what you and your colleagues have always done. This, too, is good to realize.)

For now, tuck these beliefs and counter-beliefs away. As you read the book, reflect on your thinking. Has it changed? Have you willingly tested any of these viewpoints? What were the results?

Before the Next Meeting

- Observe your writing class and identify one or two ways in which your students are dependent upon you during the drafting stage.